

I have an "Ecology Now" sticker on a car that drips oil everywhere it's parked.

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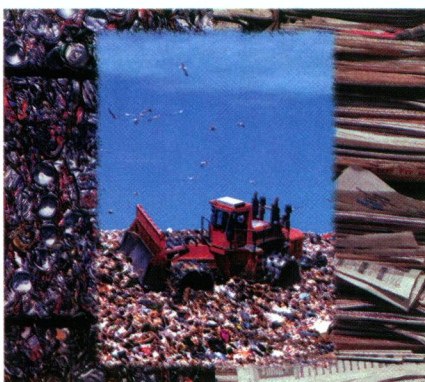
Forum

NRDC Report Trashes Recycling Critics

On 30 June 1996, *The New York Times Magazine* published an article, "Recycling is Garbage" by John Tierney, that blasted recycling and its proponents. The article nominated recycling as "[maybe] the most wasteful activity in modern America" and declared that popular interest in recycling boils down to the U.S. public's need for a "rite of atonement for the sin of excess."

The National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) responded to Tierney's article with a report published last February entitled *Too Good to Throw Away: Recycling's Proven Record*. In the 86-page report, NRDC senior scientist Allen Hershkowitz takes Tierney to task, unequivocally defending recycling. The report also illustrates the ferocity of the battle between recyclists and antirecyclists—a muddy battle in which selective emphasis and reading out of context are all-too-frequent weapons, and consensus on virtually any point is rare. The sticking point appears to be a misalignment of priorities—the antirecycling faction's insistence on the importance of economics versus what Hershkowitz calls "a philosophical belief that people throughout the world are interdependent . . . [which necessitates] an important awareness of one's relationship to others and responsibilities to them."

The NRDC report compares the pollution produced by virgin-resource processing to that produced by recycling, with results that appear to directly contradict Tierney's data. For example, Tierney wrote that "recycling newsprint actually creates more water pollution than making new paper: for each ton of recycled newsprint that's produced, an extra 5,000 gallons of waste water are discharged." Hershkowitz retorts that new mills that recycle 100% newsprint don't even discharge a *total* of 5,000 gallons of water per ton of manufactured product, much less 5,000 extra gallons. The report observes that Tierney's example came from a study that, despite the issue of extra waste water, eventually found "clear and substantial environmental advantages from recycling all of the grades of paper [examined]." But Tierney maintains he chose his example "to show readers that recycling isn't inherently better in all environmental aspects"—even though the net result may be favorable.



Recycling versus the landfill. While some contend that recycling helps nothing but our consciences, others say such claims are trash.

Chapter 2 of the NRDC report focuses on landfills. Tierney called them the logical choice for garbage disposal—safe, cheap, and convenient. The report says landfills are expensive and environmentally dangerous, causing air and water pollution that can not be adequately handled with today's technology. How much pollution is actually caused by the recyclables included in the garbage stew? Commenting on his story, Tierney says that "most of the materials involved in recycling—paper, glass, and plastics—pose little toxic risk in themselves. Removing newspapers, junk mail, and juice containers from landfills is not going to make landfills significantly safer." But the report says even seemingly benign trash can be a potential health hazard. For example, yard waste, food waste, and paper emit methane gas upon decomposition. In fact, Hershkowitz writes, "U.S. landfills are among the single greatest contributors of global methane emissions."

The report argues that recycling's high cost is largely due to the inevitable growing pains of any new industry. Responding to Tierney's statement that recycling one ton of garbage in New York City costs \$200 more than landfilling the same amount, Hershkowitz points out that New York is "perhaps the only city in the United States" that doesn't charge a tipping fee for dumping trash. He calls for cities to commit to funding and broadening their recycling programs, and also advocates consumer and manufacturer responsibility, including using less packaging and implementing container-deposit programs.

In response to Tierney's complaint that the federal government and several states have

passed laws requiring public agencies, among others, to buy recycled materials, the report maintains that Congress has never passed a law that actually requires municipalities or companies to recycle. Of his report, Hershkowitz says, "[T]he preface, by a republican governor, and the epilogue, by a senior representative of a democratic president, confirms the bipartisan support recycling enjoys." Bipartisan support doesn't cut any ice in some quarters. Commenting on the arguments outlined in the NRDC report, Tierney says, "Warnings do not refute facts." But when it comes to recycling, defining just what the "facts" are seems a tricky prospect.

Environmental Aces

Because of the work of Alexander Nikitin, in 1996 the world got an unprecedented look at the Russian Navy's aging nuclear fleet and the potential for disaster in northwest Russia, where 18% of the world's nuclear reactors reside. Because of the work of Biruté Galdikas, the endangered orangutans of Indonesia are being studied and protected, along with thousands of acres of the rainforests where they make their homes. Because of the work of Terri Swearingen, the United States revised its rules for hazardous waste incinerators, implementing stricter limits on the release of dioxin and heavy metals. Because of the work of Nick Carter, African governments have joined together in a multinational effort to stop illegal wildlife trade.

These people were recognized this spring, along with other activists from around the world, for making extraordinary efforts to protect the environment and to raise the public's awareness of environmental issues. The Goldman Environmental Prizes were awarded on April 14, and the Tyler Prizes for Environmental Achievement were awarded on May 2. The six winners of the Goldman Prize received \$75,000 each for their dedication to environmental causes, while the three winners of the Tyler Prize shared a \$150,000 award.

Established in 1990, the Goldman Prize recognizes grassroots activists from around the world by annually awarding one person from each of the world's six inhabited continental regions. Swearingen, a nurse from East Liverpool, Ohio, was the 1997 Goldman winner for North America. Though